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THE ÆSTHETIC THEORY OF EDGAR POE

It is now a long time since the personal fogs that clouded a true estimate of the genius of Edgar Allan Poe have lifted. Intelligent Americans no longer assert that because Poe's life was a loose one, his influence as a story-teller should not be a source of pride to his fellow-countrymen. The nation that Baudelaire stigmatized as gas-lit has outgrown that primitive state. We have learned to appreciate the artistic soul for what it is, without considering, save in a subordinate manner, the tenement of clay it inhabits. The *frisson nouveau* that Poe taught France through Baudelaire was not merely a new shudder, it was well-nigh a new literary device. Certainly it was the germ of an entire literary school, for however much the Symbolists ascribe their origin to other influences, and however true it may be that it took French sensuality in conjunction with an interest in horror and the horrible actually to furnish their motivating force, still it was Poe who pointed out the artistic values of that horror, and in the last analysis he must be conceded to be one of their literary progenitors.

The invention of the short story, and more particularly of the detective story, is another claim Poe has on posterity. In this case also, it was in France that the value of his invention was first realized. Gaboriau with his Lecoq stories doubtless surpassed him; a score have surpassed him as short-story tellers. But once more he remains as the creator, not this time of a mere literary device, but of one of the most flexible and variously employed of all modern forms of fiction.

Both as one who could express the inexpressible and the horrible, and as a writer of short stories, Poe has been surpassed by his disciples. As a critic, however much he has been underestimated, in his own field he has scarcely ever been equalled for clarity and continuity of thought and for that rare power of pursuing an idea to its logical conclusion. His importance in the history of criticism lies chiefly in the fact that he clearly foreshadowed, if he did not originate, the entire corpus of modern æsthetic theory. Modern æsthetics owe their beginning to the

inevitable æsthetic fact of the painting of Cezanne and Henri-Matisse. They were evolved by such men as Mr. Roger Fry and Mr. Clive Bell, quite without reference to the thought of Edgar Allan Poe. His æsthetics, on the other hand, owe their beginning to the inevitable æsthetic fact of his own poetry. Moreover, inasmuch as poetry partakes of the nature both of art (in the narrower sense in which it now employed) and of literature, he was compelled to make a far more thorough analysis of the relations of art and literature than modern thinkers have even conceived, much less attempted. It is quite aside from the issue that Poe's critical theories are set forth in the relatively small compass of three brief essays. It is not through prolixity, but through clarity of thought that he has contrived not only to antedate modern æstheticians by some seventy-five years, but even in many respects to surpass them.

First of all, however, let us investigate briefly the hypotheses presented for our consideration by the apologists for "post-impressionism." According to these theorists the word "art" connotes that expression of creative genius by which æsthetic emotion is engendered in an individual when he is brought in contact with the ideal form or ideal sound created. The definitive phrases they employ are "significant form" for the plastic arts, and "significant tone-combination" for music. Music, painting, sculpture, and architecture are the only forms of human expression permitted by them to enter the category of art. This theory is to be sure exceedingly plausible, and at the very least stimulating. It implies that painting must not be mere chromophotography, and damns Academy pictures; it implies that music must not have narrative qualities and damns programme music. Everything considered, it damns a great deal. Nevertheless, as a test of what is art, this thing which the moderns call æsthetic emotion, and which Poe called divine ecstasy, is not at all bad. But even with this admitted, much is left unexplained; for example, pictures like those of Mr. Sargent, which please one greatly but which leave one cold, and, above all, poetry.

On this last point, the place of poetry, let me quote Mr. Clive Bell's monograph, pretentiously entitled *Art*: "I know how little," he writes, "the intellectual and factual content of great

poetry has to do with its significance. The actual meaning of the words in Shakespeare's songs, the purest poetry in English, is either trivial or trite. They are nursery rhymes or drawing-room ditties." He goes on to show that the same is true one way or another of Dante and Milton, and concludes by asserting that "in great poetry it is the formal music that makes the miracle. The poet expresses in form an emotion but distantly related to the words set down. But it is related; it is not purely artistic emotion. . . . The form is burdened with an intellectual content, and that content is a mood that mingles with and reposes on the emotions of life." In brief, poetry (and with it all literature) is excluded from the domain of art on the ground that it imitates life. Imagine the shocked horror of Aristotle on learning this verdict. Plato, on the other hand, we can conceive admitting that Mr. Bell's theory was not wholly incompatible with his own, in so far as it admitted that the function of music is to elevate the soul.

But if literature is to be in a category by itself, and is forever to be refused the denomination of art, what relation does it bear to its former sisters, music and painting and sculpture. And, above all, must poetry be condemned as Mr. Bell seems to condemn it, because it is *tainted* with literature? Would it not be better to say that poetry is 'great as both literature and art, or as either one of them? On all these points, the modern æstheticians are silent, just as they are silent when we ask an explanation of why we are pleased with Mr. Sargent's paintings, though they stir us not at all, or why we enjoy programme music like the *Danse Macabre* or *Le Spectre de la Rose*, though we do not feel for it anything even suggestive of the high emotion we feel for a symphony of Beethoven or an oratorio of Handel. The post-impressionist apologists are silent, because they need concern themselves only with painting whose most apparent value lies in its stimulus to æsthetic emotion.

But where they are silent, Poe, who felt acutely the whole problem of the relation of literature to art as it is present in poetry, expresses himself in no uncertain tones. He confronts the Aristotelian theory of imitation squarely. Literature must, indeed, imitate life, he says, and as it imitates it well or ill it is

pleasing or displeasing. But literature is not the only means by which creative genius expresses itself. There is a far higher and more perfect medium, and that is art. In the following passage from *The Poetic Principle* he comes nearer to reconciling Plato with Aristotle than any other literary critic who has attempted it: "Just as the lily is repeated in the lake," he writes, "or the eyes of Amaryllis in the mirror, so is the mere oral or written repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colors, and odours, and sentiments, a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition is not poetry." No, this is rather literature, this is what is created under Aristotelian rules. The poet, says Poe, has not proved his divine title by transcribing human experience: "There is still something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs." This thirst, he says, belongs to the immortality of man, is the desire of the moth for the star: "It is no mere appreciation of the beauty before us,—but a wild effort to reach the beauty above. . . . And thus when by Poetry,—or when by music, the most entrancing of the poetic moods,—we find ourselves melted into tears—not as the Abbate Gravia supposes—through excess of pleasure, but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and forever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses."

The slightly florid language of this quotation must not blind us to the fact that it contains in a measure the key to the problem which modern theorists have not attempted to solve. The creative genius of the man of letters is imitative. The imitation is pleasing, however, not as Poe says because it repeats reality, but because by creating another reality it helps us to escape the terrible fact of everyday existence. If it be classical, it furnishes the escape through the charm of formal perfection it lends to the new reality; if it be romantic, through the charm of sentimental perfection; if it be "realistic," through the charm of a perfection of detail. And poetry, *as literature alone*, amply justifies its existence by the ever accessible doorway it

offers to the realm of illusion and idea. True poetry, as Poe points out, must, indeed, be more than this. It must aid us not only to escape but to transcend reality by virtue of its pure sound. "And when they have taught him the use of the lyre," says Plato, "they introduce him to the poems of other excellent poets, who are the lyric poets; and these they set to music and make their harmonies and rhythms quite familiar to the children's souls, in order that they may learn to be more gentle and harmonious and rhythmical; . . . for the life of a man in every part has need of harmony and rhythm." And he says, "Again the true order of going . . . is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is." Plato explains quintessential beauty in terms of ethics; Poe, in more mystical, semi-religious phraseology; and yet the two are not far apart.

Indeed, when it comes to this matter of phraseology, there can be no question that as regards Poe and Mr. Bell Poe has far and away the better of the comparison. For the moderns have rejected the word *beauty* altogether. One cannot distinguish, they say, between the beauty of Hayden's *Military Symphony* and the beauty of a butterfly's wing or of a woman's face. And so they discard the word and substitute the somewhat cryptic adjective *significant*. It is the significant form of a Byzantine Mosaic that stirs us; our being vibrates in response to the significant tone-combination of Mozart's *Symphony in G-Minor*. The chief fault with the word *significant* is, as I have said, its esotericism. The trouble with the word *form* is that it is too closely associated with the particular genius of classical art and literature readily to be dissociated from it in order to serve its new purpose. In other words, the phrase as a whole lacks catholicity. It smacks of artistic cliques, salons, receptions, élite. It is in some ways the merest of catch-words. "I like that picture." Why? "Because of its significant form." And what can the discussion do but end? No, the phrase is a bad one.

Poe, on the contrary, has not despised the word *beauty*, but he has prefixed to it the adjective *supernal*. Supernal beauty is not only a charming phrase, but is also readily understood, and not for a moment confused with the aforesaid beauty of a butterfly's wing, or even (unless one is sentimental) with that of a woman's face. "It is in music, perhaps," Poe writes, "that the soul most clearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the poetic sentiment, it struggles,— the creation of *supernal beauty*. It *may* be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained *in fact*. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels." Once more, beneath the familiar floridity, we discover a valuable truth, and we find that Plato's absolute beauty and Poe's supernal beauty are in general one and the same thing. But Plato's attitude toward absolute beauty differs from Poe's supernal beauty, as I have hinted, in that Plato views æsthetics from its ethical side while Poe views it as the science of art, and art as the sister of religion.

Here the modern theorists come closer to the Platonic notion than does Poe, for both emphasize the ethical importance of art. But the moderns seek to *justify* æsthetic emotions as the means to the ethical end of "good thoughts," while Plato makes "good thoughts" the means to the æsthetic, even the metaphysical end of absolute beauty. Poe stands in the middle ground between these two. He grants that "Taste" through its preference for beauty wages "war upon Vice, solely on the grounds of her deformity." At the same time, he insists that a poem is its own ultimate justification. "Under the sun there neither exists, nor can exist, any work more thoroughly dignified than this very poem . . . this poem written solely for the poem's sake." One wonders whether Whistler were well acquainted with the essay on *The Poetic Principle* when he promulgated his dogmas. Certainly his war-cry of "Art for art's sake" sounds very like these words of his fellow-countryman.

It may well be doubted, of course, whether Poe himself was fully aware that his own theory demanded for its fulfillment a close relation between religious mysticism and poetry. "Let

me remind you," he writes, "that (how or why we know not) this certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all higher manifestations of true beauty." Is it not for the same reason that the religious mystic is sad, because his desire for perfect union with the Universal is vain, and because he knows its vanity? Is not all poetry, all art but another mode of seeking that union? What could be sadder than this desire of "the moth for the star"? If we turn to his poem, we find an inkling that Poe was to some extent aware of the source of poetic sorrow:—

If I could dwell
Where Israfael
Hath dwelt, and he where I,
He might not sing so wildly well
A mortal melody,
While a bolder note than this might swell
From my lyre within the sky.

Still, this is a very shadowy conception. At best it merely indicates that Poe knew in his heart the subtle connection between poetry and religion, though he either had not the energy, or was not able to formulate definitely the nature of that connection.

As regards terminology also, we find in Poe a far clearer notion of the precise meaning of the phrase "æsthetic emotion" than we find in the moderns. The phrase itself is, of course, of relatively recent coinage, and for the tyro its meaning is a little ambiguous. It necessarily suggests not only the human emotions as they are presented in literature and art, but also that exceedingly untrustworthy chill of the spine and contraction of the throat that everyone has felt in the presence of the sublime, or apparently sublime. But these physical evidences are neither conclusive nor exclusive proof of the genuineness of the emotion. Conclusive they are not, for they are frequently felt in consequence of hearing most detestable music, or of being present at some exceedingly tawdry Easter Mass. Neither are they exclusive, for we feel no chill of the spine (however deeply we may be moved) while gazing on some superb piece of bronze or marble, or even at what remains of the Parthenon. What the moderns call "æsthetic emotion" Poe calls *elevation of soul*, a phrase

which scarcely needs explanation. Emotion has become elevation, feeling has become spiritual. We know that our soul is elevated in the presence of the Hermes of Praxiteles, though we have no physical feelings or emotions (in the vulgar sense) at all.

To recapitulate, then, we find that Poe has established literature to be an imitation, art a transcendence of reality. Such a theory, it seems to me, is capable of great ramification as an explanation of the problem of why we are pleased by Academy pictures or by the paintings of Mr. Sargent, although we cannot but confess that they do not conduce to spiritual exaltation. Is it not possible that a painting may have somewhat the same appeal as a book, by affording us an analogous escape from reality? The moderns condemn what they call chromophotography, because it imitates. But they fail to realize that the only pleasure we derive from photography is the pleasure we should derive from seeing the object which has been photographed, while a painting, because creative genius of a literary bent has made it for us, pleases us by taking us away from material reality to that other fresh and beautiful reality which he presents to our view. And no matter how detailed the picture, it will have much the same charm as we find in a "realistic" novel. The chief means by which Dostoevsky helps us escape reality in *Crime and Punishment* is by his painstaking, almost affectionate dwelling on minor details. One might say the same of Rossetti's *Monna Vanna*, or even of Frith's *Paddington Station*, so contemptuously abused by Mr. Bell.

Poe has not only definitely related literature and art, but, in doing so, he has gone a long way, as I have indicated, toward a reconciliation of Aristotelians and Platonists. Although he receives his poetic inheritance directly from the pseudo-Platonic romanticists, he has not fallen too much into their misconception that the aim of literature is to create purely sensuous illusion. He has, in a measure, related that heresy to the true Aristotelian theory of imitation by holding it the function of literature to imitate and create an illusion which would steal away our senses to an artificial world. But the true Platonic doctrine that relates illusion to the soul he has claimed as the special creed of

art, and in the poet has found a perfect reconciliation between the literary and artistic genius. The poet, as a man of letters, transcribes a sunset into connotative words that his reader may escape the heat of noonday or the sombre grayness of an overcast sky. This is imitation, and this is the sensuous illusion. But the poet, as an artist, sees a sunset; his soul is elevated and in golden words he pours out that elevation that his reader may, as he reads, transcend the passing hour, and for an instant be at harmony with the universe. Then the poet has composed a perfect poem.

But whether the poet be man of letters or artist, he is, and must always be, a craftsman. Granted that elevation of the soul is the beginning and end of art, and that clarity of vision is the beginning and end of literature, neither spiritual exaltation nor clear eyes are enough. Inspiration we must have, to be sure, but also, perspiration. "Many writers," says Poe in *The Philosophy of Composition*, "poets in especial, prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes." True, indeed, the artist conceives his work in a moment of "ecstatic intuition," but he does not bring it forth without great travail, in which it is perpetually liable to miscarriage, through lack of good obstetrics, or (to leave a distasteful metaphor) through ignorance of technical laws.

It is for this reason that I have never understood why critics have felt that Poe was debasing his own work when he wrote the account of how he constructed *The Raven*, and have consequently doubted the sincerity of the essay in which that account is contained, *The Philosophy of Composition*. At first blush, indeed, the process seems to be artificial to a degree, but closer examination reveals that this artificiality lies in the craftsmanship; the divine afflatus, while Poe does not affirm it, must still be predicated of him. For if it were not, there would be at least two serious gaps in his explanation. He tells us, in the first place, that he planned to make his poem "universally appreciable," and so chose beauty as his province and melancholy as his tone. This is all very well; but just whence sprang "the

saintly maiden whom the angels name Lenore"? A poem dealing with the Crucifixion were just as beautiful and far more melancholy than this. Again, he devotes a page or so to an attempted explanation of his choice of the word "nevermore," but to the end he leaves us very largely in the dark as to its origin. Beyond that, the essay is wholly true and reasonable. Beauty, melancholy, and "nevermore" were temperamental in their source. From them, by means of an exquisite technique, he has translated temperament into what is both literature and art. He is not only a creative genius; he is also a conscious creative genius. That is the only difference between him and more favored artists, to whom technique belongs and by whom it is employed well-nigh unconsciously, and certainly through divine rather than human right.

This consciousness of Poe's genius is, unfortunately, responsible for what seems so mathematical in many of his stories, a quality which frequently obtrudes itself on our otherwise thoroughly genuine enjoyment of them. His method of dealing with craftsmanship, then, overemphasizes its artificial side. And this theory is very likely to become pernicious. It leads, on the one hand to the *tour de force*, on the other to the abandonment of art by the man of genius in favor of a more literary form of expression. We see this danger illustrated in Poe's own work. Many of his stories are so excessively logical, so like a page torn from Euclid, as almost entirely to vitiate their literary value. We see it again in the later work of a painter like Puvis de Chavannes, who was so proud of his discovery that a wall was flat (to use Mr. Huneke's expression) that his whole genius was absorbed in demonstrating its flatness. On the other hand, we see it in Mr. Sargent's painting, where his technical ability has led him to exchange the creation of art for the creation of the literary picture.

Poe has of course contributed several other valuable ideas to the corpus of critical theory. He has, in the first place, shown to perfection that a "long poem" is a contradiction in terms, since sustained spiritual elevation is nearly impossible both for poet and reader. In this idea he has been of much assistance to modern critics who insist that poetry must be judged by

moments,—a theory with no little evil influence when applied to short and supposedly sustained pieces, but of great value when judgment is to be passed on the artistic merit of longer compositions. Who could make use of other criteria when reading *Lycidas*, for example? Then, too, Poe has given us one of the best or at least one of the most cited definitions of poetry. "The rhythmical creation of beauty," although it is a phrase almost equally applicable to music, still lays needed emphasis on what is so often overlooked by those who insist on "the didactic," that beauty is the end and aim of poetry; as well as on what is so often overlooked by our modern imagists, that that beauty must be rhythmical, whether or not it be conventionally metred. Finally, in *The Rationale of Verse*, Poe has contributed an extremely thoughtful if not altogether exhaustive study of English verse-form, a study which suffers from Poe's carelessness in distinguishing between the quantitative and accentual metrical systems.

Poe is not without faults as a critic. His style tends to over-elaboration. His language is, as we have noted, frequently florid. But worse than either of these defects, Poe's opinion on individual pieces of poetry was not very sound. Tennyson no doubt is one of the outstanding poets of the English-speaking world, but to call him "the noblest poet that ever lived" is nothing short of absurd. Many of the citations in *The Poetic Principle* by which he seeks to illustrate his theories scarcely deserve to be called poetry at all, and would tend to throw grave doubt over the whole essay, were not Poe's thinking so intrinsically clear and logical. Perhaps both his florid language and bad judgment can be ascribed to the fact that he himself was a poet. At any rate, we gladly forgive his questionable taste for the sake of his own exquisite lyrical gift and the stimulating æsthetic doctrines of which he is the originator.

He has furnished us a basis for relating and distinguishing literature and art. He has helped us to discover the dual character of poetry. He has mediated, so far as it is possible, between the Platonists and the Aristotelians. He has shown us at least something of the place of technique in the resources of the creative genius. For all these contributions to critical

thought he deserves only our gratitude and admiration. That his æsthetic theory has not exerted so great an influence as have his poetry and prose fiction is due rather to the vast superiority of his prose fiction than to anything specious or inferior in his poetry. This our modern æstheticians should be the last to deny.

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